

Promising Practice

Innovative Contextualized Curriculum for a CNA to LPN Bridge Course



June 2010

PRACTICE CONTEXT

As a pilot site selected to participate in Illinois' Shifting Gears (SG) initiative in 2007, Oakton Community College (OCC) partnered with Presbyterian Homes to develop a bridge course to prepare a cadre of their employed Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) to enter college-credit prerequisite courses to a Practical Nursing program. Oakton Community College, located in Skokie, IL, is a comprehensive community college serving 450,000 residents in suburban Chicago. Presbyterian Homes is a large, continuing care retirement community with over 1,600 residents among five campuses in Chicago and nearby suburban areas. The intended outcome of the contextualized bridge curriculum was to provide a short-term, engaging, accessible, developmental education experience to a select group of CNAs to prepare them for credit-level instruction.

Shifting Gears is a workforce development initiative sponsored by the Joyce Foundation and in Illinois, also supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). In the first phase of SG, ten community colleges received grants to develop bridge courses to provide low-skilled or low-income adults with the training necessary to prepare them for high-demand, middle-skill jobs that provide family supporting wages. Three high-demand occupational clusters were targeted in the SG initiative: transportation-distribution-logistics, manufacturing, and health care.

PRACTICE DESCRIPTION

The College's Chair of Nursing and the Nursing Program Coordinator, both Professors of Nursing, along with the Dean of Science and Health Careers, worked closely with Presbyterian Homes in designing the bridge course, considering the needs of the full-time working students and the unique needs of a diverse group of employees, many of whom were not native English speakers and not familiar with postsecondary-level education. All students had a high school diploma, a GED, or the equivalent.

The course was built upon an existing 8-week course designed to increase the skills of applicants to the College's Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) program but whose assessment scores fall short of the admissions standard. For the bridge course, college faculty determined that by doubling the length of the 8-week course they could accommodate students' full-time work schedules. Further, by adding "College 101" content (reading

comprehension, vocabulary building and basic computer literacy skills) the bridge course could offer students the skills they needed to be successful in the eight science, math and psychology prerequisite Practical Nursing program classes. Seventeen Presbyterian Homes' employees self-selected to attend OCC's CNA to LPN bridge course. Although students were not pre-tested upon admission, they were given English and reading placement tests and the math portion of the COMPASS near the completion of the bridge course.

The bridge course curriculum was co-designed by OCC's ADN coordinator and the bridge instructor, an experienced instructor of developmental English. Class was held one day per week for three hours. The lecture/discussion and lab components were provided at OCC's Skokie campus and at a cottage at Presbyterian Homes, donated for classroom use. The bridge instructor contextualized medical vocabulary with reading, speaking and writing assignments. She used a variety of sources including the National League of Nursing (NLN) exam, which all students would eventually take as an admission requirement for the Practical Nursing program, as well as the texts "504 Absolutely Essential Words" and "Reading Smart." Students completed individual, group, and project-based assignments infused with work place skills, such as presentations and projects with firm deadlines. The instructor created an encouraging and challenging class-room environment, designing activities that built upon the learners' prior knowledge and experiences and reinforcing study and time management skills. Basic computer skills were introduced in the course once students' low levels of computer literacy were determined.

SUPPORTING STRATEGIES

1. *Extending Course Length*

Oakton Community College Nursing faculty determined that the 8-week course used as a model needed further alterations to enable student success and thus extended the timeframe, from eight to sixteen weeks. While the students admitted into the bridge course were described as a "highly motivated group," they proved to have academic needs far greater than anticipated and the extended timeframe was needed.

2. *Intensive Transition Support Services*

The provision of support services was a shared effort between the Director of Nursing Education at Presbyterian Homes and two coordinators at OCC; one with an extensive nursing background and the other an experienced admissions counselor. Transition support took many forms and required frequent,

responsive communication: advising bridge students about college-related information, providing individual registration assistance and academic advising to create individual plans of study. To accommodate students' busy work schedules and personalize the college-going experience, the co-coordinators conducted weekly visits to OCC's Skokie campus where the bridge course was held and to the Presbyterian Homes cottage to get to know the students.

3. *Instructor Selection*

Administrators at OCC realized the selection of the "right" instructor was imperative to the bridge course's success. The College specifically recruited an instructor with whom they had worked in the past. The instructor had previously been in the Peace Corps and had a great deal of experience in developmental education. Given her nurturing nature and creative, "out of the box" thinking, there was immediate agreement among OCC administrators that she possessed the qualities best suited to meet the bridge course students' needs.

CHALLENGES

- *Variance in Student Academic Preparation*

The cohort enrolled students who had a broad range of experience and diverse backgrounds (e.g., new CNA graduates up to CNAs with ten years experience). The bridge course was extended to accommodate most students' learning needs and their working schedules. One consequence of this decision was that course content and program length were perceived by some to be too slow. A few students described the pace of instruction as "frustrating;" however, the program coordinators believed that most students who complained did not demonstrate classroom performance that indicated they could successfully complete a more demanding schedule and content.

- *Limited Nursing Faculty*

College Nursing faculty capacity is a potential barrier to offering an additional CNA to LPN bridge course should other healthcare employers in the College's district request a similar opportunity. In fact, one other local provider of long-term care expressed interest in replicating the program; however, the Nursing faculty and program could not accommodate expansion, bounded by the number of qualified instructors and clinical sites for the Practical Nursing program to which the bridge course is linked.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

With respect to the first cohort involved in the SG initiative, of the 17 students who began the bridge course, 15 persisted to completion of the course. Fourteen students enrolled in the next course in the prerequisite sequence, and they are all on target to graduate in August, 2011. They will then be eligible to sit for their licensure exam to become Licensed Practical Nurses. Further, all 14 have indicated their intention to continue their education by enrolling in OCC's ADN program.

Given the SG bridge course's success, the college has used this course as a template for developing a part-time Nursing program in an effort to better accommodate working adults who are interested in becoming Registered Nurses.

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